

THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER WORLD IN A PEASANT BIBLE PARAPHRASE (BORBÁLA SZANYI MIKÓ'S "ETERNAL GOSPEL")

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I acquired the hand-written booklet, a so-called "igésfüzet" that provided the basis for my presentation in the autumn of 1992. I was gathering data for the analysis of a peasant pious society during a fieldtrip in Nagydobrony, Ukraine.

Nagydobrony is the biggest Hungarian village of Kárpátalja (Subcarpathian Area) it belongs to the district of Ungvár, and it has a population over 5000 people. Most of the inhabitants of Nagydobrony belong to the Calvinist Church.

The hand-written Bible paraphrase, or the "Notebook of the Word" (igésfüzet), presented here is the property of former members of what the people of Nagydobrony¹ refer to as the "Erdősi" congregation. The thirty–forty-member peasant ecclesiola was invited by a local peasant woman, Borbála Szanyi Mikó who was 41 at that time. The prophet woman – so I was told – was ordered by heavenly visions to form a congregation around her to transmit a heavenly message to.

Owners of these notebooks regard the pious script as of immediate heavenly origin and they think of it as a continuation of the Bible.

Their ideas about the author and the origin of the work also support this: According to these ideas Borbála Szanyi Mikó, leader of the congregation, received heavenly visions in a state of trance regularly during a period of 12 years (from the age of 41 until her death in 1950). The manuscript is the result of visions and heavenly teachings that the prophet woman noted down immediately and conveyed to the earthly world, to the members of the congregation.² Thus the prophet woman who led the congregation, the person chosen by the heavenly world, is not the author but only the transmitter (mediator) of the next of the paraphrase.

Although so far I have identified neither the author nor the origin of the manuscript, it can be proved that it comes from one or more literate persons who have some knowledge of theology, who are well-acquainted with the Bible, and in preparing the text they have been at least partially motivated by the intention to criticise the institutional church structure and its priests. This intention is demonstrated by the relationship between the

¹ I do not discuss here earlier studies of Hungarian peasant ecclesiolae. Ambrus MOLNÁR 1986: 418–443, Jenő SZIGETI 1986: 444–478.

² Similar activities were performed at the same time by Mariska Borku in the nearby Tiszaágtelek. Her followers attribute another similar Bible paraphrase, the "Lett-Szövetség", to her. KÜLLÖS 1991: 346–349.

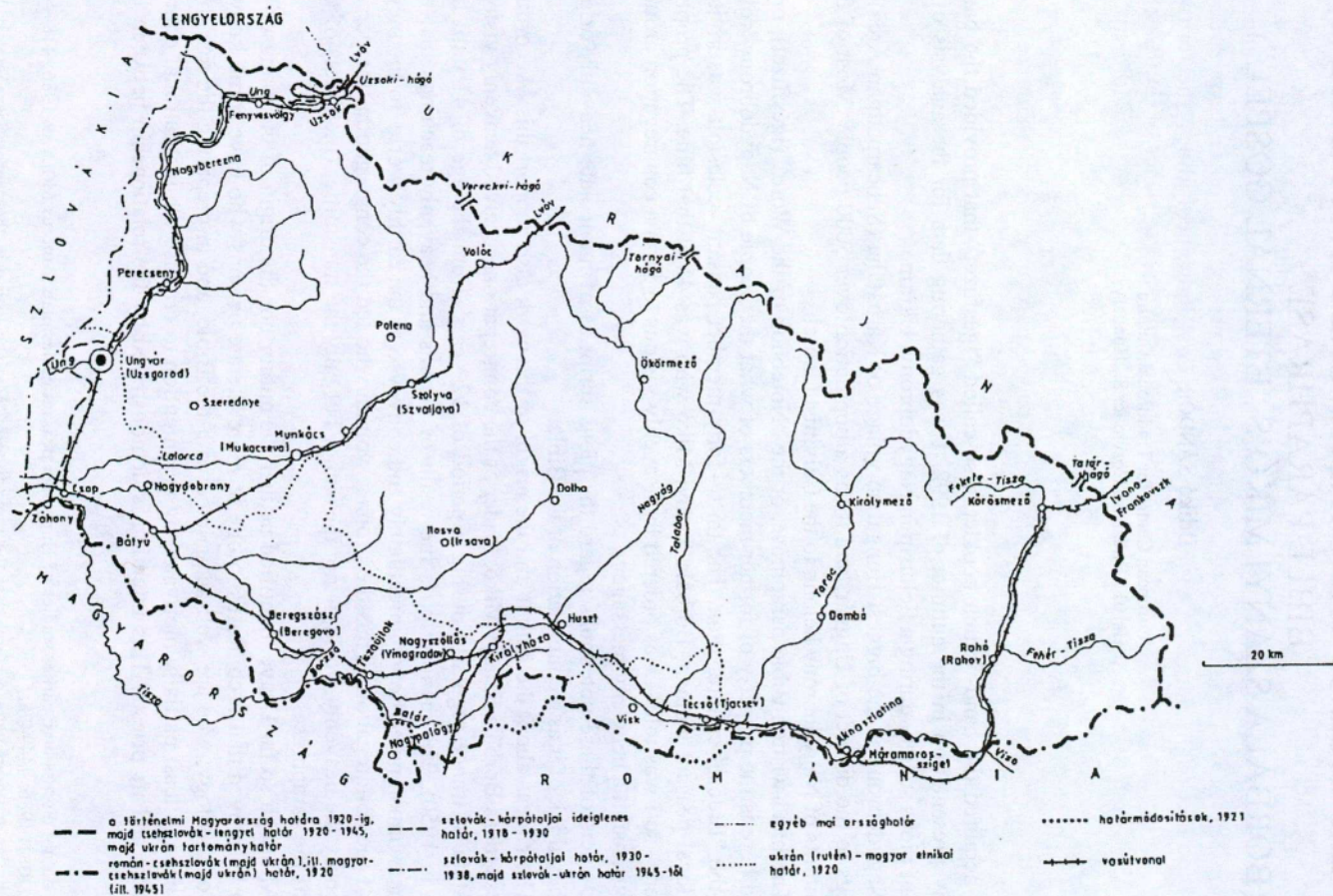


Fig. 1. Map of Subcarpathian Area.

core-text and the corresponding Bible references which often focuses on the contrast between good and bad pastors, and between true and false prophets.

The formal model of the Notebook of the Word is the Bible, or as the believers say *it has been introduced* in the Bible. Bible reference locations are marked in the text, and the Notebook of the Word itself is divided into numbered verses.³ The other theme around which the text of the paraphrase is organised is the Last Judgement told in the form of heavenly visions and spiritual trips. The paraphrase adopts several verses of the Revelations of St. John (for example 2:23, 6:9, 10:7, 21:1–2) unchanged, and we find a somewhat looser connection between the two texts even more frequently:

“And I saw a great light shining, and in the light I saw several candles placed in candlesticks, and each lit the place where it stood. And a man was walking between them.” – which relates to the Revelations 1:12–13.

The manuscript contains 16 shorter and longer visions of the world which describe experiences phrased in the first person singular. The narrator has lived through the events and this fortifies their credibility.

“10.⁴ And then the Angel of the Lord appeared for me, and took my spirit with him, and he put me down at the side of a big river and said to me.

What is what you see and I say that I see a tall and well-kept fruit tree. And several green branches on it.

And again he says what is that you see under the tree?

And I say that I see many snakes, and all kinds of ugly creatures that all try to go up the tree but they always fall back.

And he says there are many who try but never reach the branches because their minds are in the dark. These are the ones for whom the dimness of the dark is reserved.

You, servant girl of the Lord, as you have seen those ugly creatures trying to go up the tree, the same way do your enemies want to convince you. But do not be afraid of them, because I, the Lord have convinced them.

Speak to them like this.

The many will do away with our enemies.”

Different types of texts follow each other in the manuscript: pieces of text that the believers refer to as “Words” and which consist of descriptions of visions, heavenly teachings and proclamations, and texts of prayers and songs. Besides these, I have access to another type of source from among members of the very same community: personal belief-stories told as their trip to the other world.

What follows here is an analysis and comparison of the motifs of oral and written visions and stories of the other world.

³ The copy of Borbála Vinda is a checked school notebook in which the Words form 110 pages numbered from 1 to 117 continuously, and from then on numbered again from 1 to 9. The 24 prayers and 28 songs inserted in between Words have been copied into a separate notebook.

⁴ Numbers belong to the original manuscript.

During World War II and the Soviet era Bible paraphrases obtained a peculiar role:

- new printed pious literature (Bibles, psalm books) found no way to the Hungarians living in Kárpátalja (Sub-Carpathia) during this period, so they copied into notebook any pious text they had access to.

- their religious life was strictly controlled by the state power: only Sunday services were permitted, so it was the individual, family, and small community level of religiosity that fulfilled all the roles the Church would have under ordinary circumstances (roles such as classes of religion, spiritual care, etc.)

- Bible paraphrases played a central role at household religious services, and this role was fortified also by the content of certain parts of the since interpreted text.

TRIPS TO THE OTHER WORLD IN THE PARAPHRASE

SPIRITUAL TRIP TO THE OTHER WORLD. REACHING THE OTHER WORLD

There are two ways to establish a connection between this world and the other one according the text of the manuscript.

In one of the two types the mortal man travels and gets to the other world (naturally the trip is not physical but spiritual; the text also emphasises this).

"And then I was taken in spirit..."

"And then the Angel of the Lord appeared for me, and took my spirit with him, and he put me down at the side of a big river..."

The set form of the text and the attached situation where a heavenly being takes the souls with him both originate in the Bible, for example Ez 2:14.

In the other type it is not the human actor that moves around, instead, the sky opens up and a man or angel descends from heaven:

"And I can see seven angels descend on earth. And one of them comes to me and says..."

"And an angel dressed all in white appears in front of me, and he holds a candle in his right hand."

This way the "here and now" of the location is transformed. The narrator forms part of events which are not from this earth, which are not present, and although she (he) stays at the same place the other world surrounds her (him), or the sky opens up and it becomes visible for the human eye what happens over there in the other world.

LIVING THE EXPERIENCE

The narrator (the I, the prophet) is a passive actor in the spiritual trips of the Bible paraphrase. She (he) is a viewer of the events, she (he) only suffers the things that happen to her (him) without active participation in them: she (he) can see, hear, and at most prays

when she gets frightened, or asks a question if she does not understand the meaning of her experiences.

2. And the I was taken in my soul and an angel was standing beside me.

And the angel said. What can you see, and I said, I can see a bright cloud.

And again said. Do you know who is there upon that bright cloud, and I said I did not know. And he said God appeared for you upon that bright cloud.

But all I saw was a bright cloud and a sign on it.

And again (the angel) said, the bright cloud is a symbol of God's love for the believing souls. And again said who do you see in the world of the cloud, and I said that I did not see anyone in the world of the bright cloud.

And the angel speaks.

There is nobody who would search for the truth of God, not even one.

And my soul turned bitter and I cried out.

Oh, how poor and miserable I am.

As far as her own future and earthly life are concerned, she is encouraged to write down and teach what she understood, saw and heard, learned, and to lead her life in a way that she could deserve mercy. In other words her heavenly masters and experiences encourage her to become active after her return to the earthly world.

40. And I saw seven angels descend on earth. And he came to me and said. Judgement is made. And he spoke again. If pains torture your heart go to the altar of the Lord with a prayer of gratitude. And I went to the altar of the Lord with a prayer of gratitude and asked the Lord to ease the pain of my heart Rev.15.1. Rev.16.1.⁵

Borbála Szanyi Mikó shaped her own role as a prophet and her own activities according to this.

TOPOGRAPHY OF THE OTHER WORLD, LOCATIONS

During her trip the prophet sees the heavens or a cloud, the ceiling of the skies, her soul reaches a mountain, a tree, a church, an altar, a church entrance or an ordinary door. All these are objects that embody a universal concept of the world. A type of modelled world, the centre of the universe appears (the tree is often mentioned in the visions of the paraphrase, similarly to the Book of Revelations that has the highest number of references in the paraphrase (Rev. 2:7, 22:2, 14, 19). The location from which the prophet sees the heavenly or future earthly world (as seen during moments of the last judgement) defines the point of view, the perspective. The narrator contemplates high above the earthly world on the top of a mountain (in a church, at an altar, on a cloud). These elements of topography demonstrate the vertical division of the world, they emphasise that the spiri-

⁵ The Bible references that appear in the paraphrase form part of it.

tual traveller has reached the transcendent sphere. The soul always travels upwards and never downwards in the paraphrase, and the hell is not mentioned. Horizontally, space is divided by waters. The river bank, the spring, the sea structure space horizontally by defining what can be found on their sides. The real, earthly world only appears as a point of departure.

ACTORS OF THE TRIP TO THE OTHER WORLD

The persons in the visions can be earthly or heavenly beings. One of the earthly actors is the spiritual traveller who is present in all visions. Beside him or her groups of humans also appear who represent a particular status and who are earthly people characterised by unchanging features:

- men and women, souls of men and women with whom she prays in the heavenly temple,*
- the sinners,*
- those who look for the truth of God,*
- many (who do not stand smoke), many (who cry out),*
- the sick.*

Representatives of the heavenly world show a more varied picture. There are more of them, they are of different kinds, and they appear more frequently than earthly actors:

- the angel, the angel of Lord, 7, 10 angels, the angel of Seventh Congregation, a serving soul,*
- a man – dressed in white cambric dress, with stick in his right hand, 3 men*
- tired wanderers : messengers of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*
- the Lord*
- king – a golden crown on his head, a king invisible on Earth*
- pastor*
- saints who were killed because they testified for Jesus*
- a heavenly multitude with the Lord leading them*
- the sower of seeds.*

At times representatives of the heavenly world are also characterised by their physical appearance in the visions (white cambric, gold, crown, etc.), and it is only God that the text attributes personality traits to (angry, judgmental).

PLANTS, ANIMALS

Plants and animals of the visions are not real creatures, instead, almost every one of them are actors of biblical parables who incarnate symbolic contents.



- *dove, the Dove of doves*⁶
- *goat and sheep*⁷
- *snake*⁸
- *four spirited animals*⁹
- *the vine*¹⁰
- *wheat and tares*¹¹
- *red and white flowers (symbolic colours)*
- *tree, fruit tree, fruits.*¹²

OBJECTS

Similarly to the animals and plants, the world of objects in the visions carries meanings beyond itself. The majority originate in the Bible, while a smaller portion can be traced back to a baroque collection of sermons.

– *slab, stone slab*: This object appears in the paraphrase several times, usually with an inscription (the text of the Ten Commandments, “Love”, “King of Glory”, “Triumph”, “God has the victory”), and at other times as a clean writing table with attached writing materials that the heavenly messenger sent. The slabs are carried by angels who hand it over to the visitor–telling prophet.

– *candle and torch*: it stand for souls, or perhaps Jesus or God. The candlestick appears several times in the Book of Revelations (Rev 1:12, 13:20, 2:1) and it is related with the last judgement.

– *clay and iron dish* (Rev 2:27)

– *clean white cloths*: The serving spirit dresses the prophet in it showing her change of state (transcendence).

– *clock*: The clock shows three, its tick-tacking reminds of the coming of the Last Judgement. It is a characteristically baroque idea about earthly transience, the irresistibly passing time, a symbol of Vanities. It refers to the Act of the Apostles 2:15 (*it is the third hour of the day*) where Peter preaches about the last judgement.

– *stick, measuring stick*

– *flag*: a baroque vision of the heavenly multitude following the flag.

Objects appearing in the visions of the paraphrase also verify that one of the the-

⁶ “The spirit of God has descended on Jesus as a dove.” Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:12.

⁷ During the last judgement the pastor separates the goats and the sheep. Matthew 25:32–33.

⁸ The snake is presented in the paraphrase as a general incarnation of all evil. It appears as an actor of apocalyptic visions several times in the Revelations (Rev 9:19, 12:9, 20:2).

⁹ It appears in apocalyptic visions of prophets of the Old Testament (Ez 1:5) and in the Revelations as well (Rev 4:6–9, 19:4).

¹⁰ Christ can be identified with the vine, and the chosen people with the vineyard of the Lord. Esaias 5:1, Matthew 21:33.

¹¹ Jesus’ parable is an often cited part of the Bible. Matthew 13:24,36.

¹² Trees have already been mentioned in the section on topography. The fruit bearing tree and the fruit of the soul are often cited phrases in sermons. Matthew 13:8, Luke 6:43, Gal 5:22, Rev 22:2.

matic emphases of the text of the paraphrase is the Last Judgement, the ideas about the last things. Its image construction was influenced also by frequently baroque visual elements (or images employed in sermons and pious texts).

NATURAL PHENOMENA

Cosmic phenomena and catastrophes (fire, smoke, flood, thunder, lightning, earthquake, cloud, sun, sea, star, moon, darkness, rainbow) belong to the apocalyptic vision, and are typical visual elements of the Bible (Revelations) and of the Baroque as well.

ORAL NARRATIVES ABOUT TRIPS TO THE OTHER WORLD

Three members of the congregation told stereotypical narratives of their trips to the other world as their own dreams. They all told their stories in the first person singular but they emphasised that they were dreams. A shared feature of the stories is the appearance of the late prophet woman, Borbála Szanyi Mikó, and even of other members of the "Erdősi" congregation (mentioned by their names).

Thus, earthly actors are known to the narrators, they are real people (as opposed to the typified, conventionalised earthly figures of the paraphrase).

These are typical motifs of the persons representing the other world in the belief stories:

– *a small old man with white hair*: he always appears as a helper, he escorts earthly actors to the other world (he takes them over in his boat, to the island on the other side of the river),

– *the brown man, the half man*: negative power, the incarnation of the Evil,

– *Jesus* : the counterpoint of the former actor.

The earthly actors of these stories are active: they start out for the other world on their own, by their own initiative (no mention is made about possession), and they have to pass a series of tests on the way (they have to get through a small hole, the Satan tempts them with worldly books, with mirrors and grimaces, they have to push trains apart with their hands so that they can reach Jesus).

Having returned to the earth there are no activities (for example they do not tell about their experiences in public, they do not teach, they do not prophesy), however, the heavenly trip and the personal encounter with Jesus becomes a cathartic experience that change those believers who made it to the other world (they become happy, their souls become light).

These stories mention no plants or animals, the tree is the only element that appears in the paraphrase as well. This tree, however, is not the topological element with central location in the model of the universe; it is the well defined object of the human environment (the walnut tree in the garden of the mother-in-law – the prophet woman itself – where the other world travellers return to after the trip).

The situation of objects is quite similar: the narrator mentions actual elements of his or her everyday world of objects. The *chair* from which her mother-in-law rises when they start out to the other world, a small stool (“like what fishermen have”), the small old man widens the opening between the two worlds with a *carving hatchet* so that everybody can get through. There is a *house* in the other world where travellers are first tempted by the Evil, and then Jesus appears to them, and there is a *table* and a *chair* in the house. The text of the paraphrase contains no such “household elements, the other world is not so common”, it is not so close to the narrators’ every day world of objects.

Besides everyday objects we can also find symbolic objects in the text. We can see, however, that even in these cases the point of departure is closely connected to the narrators’ own immediate physical environment: the escort takes members of the congregation to the other-world-island by boat (the village is situated by the river Latorca where some villagers dedicate themselves to fishing!), and there is an *arched door* to get through to reach the other world. There are two objects which appear in the other world stories as well as in the Notebook of the Word: the *slab* with inscription “The Gift of God”, and the *mirror* (the devil holds it up to the narrator so that she can see herself in it) together with the *book* (“magazines”) as tools of the evil temptation, as embodiments of mundane vanity.

The Bible paraphrase is a written, semi-popular text, while the narratives of trips to the other world are orally transmitted belief-stories. Differences in the imagery of the other world are natural consequences of the differences in genre, form, and origin: the more general formulation in case of the paraphrase, and the personal tone, individual formulation, realistic details in case of the narratives. We have to bear in mind that it was the same community that used both types of texts. Besides, there exists an oral tradition of the originally written text of the Bible paraphrase since the leader of the congregation demanded that members learned it by heart. This knowledge of former members of the ecclesiola is still so intensive that they can cite certain parts of the paraphrase while they talk, and they express their identification with certain parts of it (for instance, they identify the “Erdősi” congregation¹³ with the Laodicea congregation that is mentioned in the notebook). However, they do not tell these parts as their own other world experiences, as they do with the belief-stories.

Their knowledge about the other world and thus the imagery they constructed about it is very delicately proportioned, it is varied as far as its sources and origins are concerned, and it is expressed in complex genres, however, this knowledge and these ideas do not mix, but live together side by side precisely divided, even in the mind of a single person.

The social and political changes of the early 1990s in the Soviet Union had an impact on the fate of the Bible paraphrases. The limitations on religious life ceased to exist, and pious activities related to the institutional church became lively. Intensive missionary work started out from Hungary in the form of evangelisation, organisation of Bible study groups (the priest who arrived here in 1992 had known nothing about the actual function-

¹³ Rev 1:11, 3:14–22

ing household religious pious literature). The new reading and the lack of an immediately threatening socio-political crisis turned the attention away from the hand-written Bible paraphrases at once.

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